EXPLORATION OF MEDIUMS IN THE ART PRACTICES OF PAULA SENGUPTA AND MALLIKA DAS SUTAR

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SUBMITTED BY: MONISHA BHAWAL

ENROLLMENT NO: 2322220005006

REGISTRATION NO: 230050066157

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KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL

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Guide:	Mr. Pratap Manna
Co-Guide (if any)	Ms. Barata Sarkar
Student's Name:	Monisha Bhawal
Enrollment No:	2322220005006
Registration No:	230050066157
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Co-Guide's Signature with Date

Guide's Signature with Date

DECLARATION BY THE STUDENT

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in this dissertation entitled "Exploration of Mediums in the Art Practices of Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelors/Masters/Ph. D of Fine Arts in Painting is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from February 2025 to April 2025 under the supervision of Mr. Pratap Manna Department of Fine Arts and Painting.

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Monisha Bhawal
16/04/25

(Signature of the students with Date)

Name of the Student- Monisha Bhawal

Registration no- 230050066157

Department- Fine Arts and Design

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Abhishek Basak	*MFA (Painting) Semester 4 (2023-2025)*
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Ms. Mallika Das Sutar	*Artist*
Ms. Meenakshi Sengupta	*Assistant Professor, Department Fine arts and Design, SNU*
Mr. Pratap Manna	*Assistant Professor, Department Fine arts and Design, SNU*
Payel Das	*MFA (Applied) Semester 4 (2023-2025)*
(Dr) Sanjay Sen Gupta	*Head of Department, Department Fine arts and Design, SNU*
(Dr) Soma Bhowmik	*Assistant Professor, Department Fine arts and Design, SNU*
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Introduction

The evolution of artistic mediums throughout art history reflects not just technical innovation but also shifting cultural, social, and philosophical perspectives. In contemporary art practices, the medium has transcended its traditional role as a mere vehicle for artistic expression to become an integral conceptual component of the artwork itself. This transformation has profound implications for how we understand and interpret art in the twenty-first century.

This dissertation explores how contemporary Indian artists, especially from Bengal, are utilizing various artistic mediums as active agents in their creative processes. This study has been focussed on examining the works of two representative artists from similar backgrounds – Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar – and thus might not showcase the full range of approaches to materials today. Moreover, for various unavoidable reasons, it relied mostly on written information, partly on viewing both the artists' work and talking directly to one of them. However, it demonstrates how materials themselves carry meaning, memory, and cultural significance to the artists and their viewers, challenging the conventional notion of medium as a passive carrier of artistic intent.

The importance of this research lies in exploring and recording the creative ways how Bengal and thus Indian artists use different materials in their art. These unique approaches, however, often remain unknown, not discussed and misunderstood. By looking at how Indian artists work with a wide range of materials — like traditional textiles, embroidery, human hair, and everyday found objects — this study shows how they add something special and valuable to the global conversation about materials in art.

The primary aim of this research is to investigate how medium selection and manipulation function as meaning-making processes in the works of Sengupta and Das Sutar. However, the key research questions include:

1. How do these artists integrate medium into their conceptual frameworks?

2. In what ways do their material choices reflect personal, cultural, and social narratives?

Methodologically, this research combines visual analysis of selected artworks with contextual research drawing from interviews, exhibition catalogues, and critical reviews. The comparative approach allows for identifying both shared strategies and distinctive individual approaches to materiality. Followed by individual case studies of Sengupta and Das Sutar and concluding with a comparative analysis that situates their practices within broader discourses of contemporary art.

This study as whole intends to create an inclusive view of Contemporary art, not just based on Western ideas. It shows how Indian artists combine traditional craft methods with modern creative thinking. By using materials in new and interesting ways, these artists create art that connects the old with the new, adding a unique voice to the world of contemporary art.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework: Evolution of the Medium through History

The idea of 'medium' in contemporary art is no longer a simple instrument of artistic expression. It has become a concept in and of itself. Traditionally the term 'medium' was mainly interpreted as the actual material used by artists like pigments, clay, timber etc. In the contemporary art world, it has evolved into an active and deeply conceptualised element.[1] Modern artists use mediums to innovate and revolutionize much more than just the work itself, because contemporary modes of production are not just a means to convey an idea, but a means of interrogating the limits of an artistic practice. The medium is both a form and content, shaping the story of the work and being shaped by it. This change in orientation is part of a larger trend in art, in which materials cease to be passive carriers of meaning and become active agents in a creative dialogue, adding layers of meaning to works based on their intrinsic physical, cultural, and historical associations.

Because of its ability to close the seeming gap between tradition and modernity, medium has now become more important in contemporary art. Artists are using both new and old media and applying them more as creative pieces that skilfully combine digital innovation with manual techniques. Through the lens of materiality, this intersection makes it easier to examine intricate thematic issues such as identity, memory, socio-political dynamics and ecological imperatives. In this setting, the media turns into a site for experimentation a way to challenge accepted socio-political conversation. It broadens the perceptual acceptance and reception by embodying the fundamental conflict between permanence and transience, the tangible and the ethereal.

The primary aim of this chapter is to outline a sound theoretical foundation for understanding the function of medium in contemporary art, with a focus on its changing importance. It aims to show how the investigation of various media has opened new channels for creative expression, allowing artists to mediate and negotiate between conventional and experimental methods.[2]

Innovation and cultural context are the driving forces behind the on-going evolution of art media experimentation in Western art history. The Renaissance (c. fourteenth-sixteenth century AD) marked a significant change in the way artists worked with their mediums, resulting in a new focus on realism and personal expression. Artists started experimenting with new materials and methods that gave them the ability to portray the world accurately and emotionally. For example, oil paints provided richer colours and more delicate shading, so painters switched from tempera to this new medium. With this switch to oil paints, painters were able to produce brighter surfaces and finer details, which enhanced the appearance of three dimensions in their artwork. They also began experimenting with natural pigments, which produced vivid and durable hues. In Renaissance, artists using charcoal and

[1] Arora Monica (April, 2021). The Medium in Art. The Social Stays.

[2] Exploring Art Medium: A Fusion of Category and Material in Art Creation. Rtistiq.

chalk to sketch and plan their compositions. On the other hand, sculptors chose materials like marble and bronze so that they could create dynamic shapes and lifelike figures. Architects drew inspiration from classical Roman designs, using stone and brick to build grand structures that often-featured beautiful frescoes. Chiaroscuro, the technique of using light and shadow, was employed to create volume and dramatic effects, enhancing the emotional depth of the painted visuals.[3]

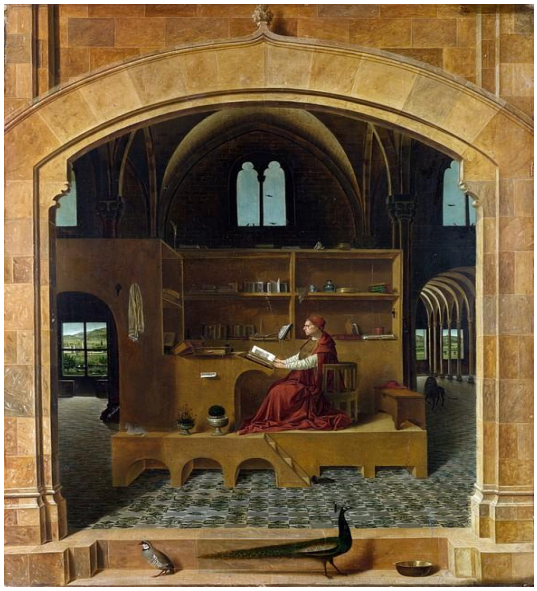

Figure 1. Saint Jerome in His Study by Antonello da Messina,1474

Figure 2. David by Michelangelo,1501-1504

During the Baroque period (c. seventeenth century), painters used new techniques and materials to show more realistic and dramatic expressions. They went beyond the limited use of colours from the Renaissance by exploring strong contrasts between light and dark and by using rich texture materials in their work. By mastering chiaroscuro (the technique of using light and shadow), artists were able to create deep shadows and bright highlights and adding emotional depth to their paintings. Oil paint was the main material used during this time. Artists began to focus on observing nature closely, which helped them create more realistic

[3]Cartwright Mark, (2020, 10th November). Renaissance Art. World History Encyclopaedia.

images of landscapes, still life and everyday scenes. They carefully chose their pigments to make paintings that were full of emotion and reflected the energetic, dramatic style of the Baroque period.[4]

Figure 3. Las Meninas by Diego Velazquez,1656

Figure 4. The Swing by Jean-Honore Fragonard,1766

Artists of the Rococo era (c. eighteenth century) made playful and sophisticated works of art by working with light and delicate materials. They used delicate pastel colours and fine oil paints on smooth canvases to create vibrant and elegant paintings. By adding thin layers of paint, they created a soft, almost see-through effect, which was perfect for showing nobles in fancy gardens. They were able to paint delicate details like lace, silk and soft facial expressions with the aid of brushes, which were frequently made from soft animal hair.

[4] Adams Laurie, (1994) A History of Western Art, The Baroque Style in Western Europe. Americas, New York. McGraw- Hill

Artists also used gold leaf and shiny decorations to make their paintings look rich and luxurious, and they used watercolors for lighter drawing.[5]

Figure 5. Oath of the Horatii by Jacques-Louis David, 1785

During the Neoclassical period (late eighteenth to early nineteenth century), artists used a special style in their materials and design that reflected the era's philosophical and political ideals. Oil paint was still the main material, but artists used it with a sense of clarity and moral purpose, using light and shadow to bring out important historical and political moments. They carefully prepared their canvases to be smooth and flat, which helped them draw clear and clean lines for architectural details. Artist used the brush with delicate control to create fine strokes that depicted heroic figures dressed in ancient Roman or Greek attire. Every detail and shadow were carefully planned to add depth and meaning to the painting.[6]

Figure 6. The Raft of the Medusa by Theodore Gericault,1818-1819

During the era of Romanticism (late eighteenth to early nineteenth century), artists used a wide variety of materials and techniques to express emotions and personal experiences. They used bold, expressive brushstrokes to show deep human feelings and the power of nature. Oil paint was their main tool, but they used it in new ways, different from earlier styles. Artists chose bright colours, including warm earth tones, fiery reds, deep blues, and glowing yellows, making the paintings feel alive with meaning. Watercolours also became important

[5] Adams Laurie, (1994) A History of Western Art, Rococo, the Eighteenth Century, and Revival Styles. Americas, New York. McGraw- Hill

[6] Adams Laurie, (1994). A History of Western Art, Neoclassicism: The Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries. Americas, New York. McGraw- Hill

during this time, allowing artists to create dreamy, almost magical images that blurred the line between reality and imagination.[7]

Figure 7. Gustave Courbet by The Painter's Studio,1854-1855

Artists of the Realist era (mid-nineteenth century) created highly detailed artwork by using traditional materials and methods. Oil paints were used by them to achieve the high level of realism and detail. They often applied multiple thin layers of paint to build up a sense of depth and texture and typically painted on canvas because it provided a durable and versatile surface for their work. To create a range of textures and effects, these artists employed a variety of brushes. Some of them used coating methods to give their works a feeling of brightness and depth. Chiaroscuro, a painting style that employs strong contrasts between light and dark to give a painting depth and volume, was frequently used. The artists were known for their careful study of the world around them. To capture the essence and a likeness of their subjects, they often spent hours to studying and drawing them.[8]

Figure 8. Impression: Sunrise by Claude Monet,1872

Impressionism (late nineteenth century) was a big change from the traditional way of painting. It focused on capturing how light and colours looked in the moment. Artists used short, thick brushstrokes and mixed colours before applying them next to each other. Instead of focusing on small details, they aimed to show the general idea of the subject. For Impressionists, showing how light changes throughout the day were very important. They

[7] History Highlights, (2023, 27th December). History of Romanticism Art.
[8] Sparks Gallery, What is Realism in Art Definition, Artists, Example.

often painted the same scene at different times to see these changes. They used bright colours and applied them with little mixing to make the painting feel lively. Impressionist artists painted everyday life and common things, like city scenes and nature.[9]

Figure 9. Mont Sainte-Victorire by Paul Cezanne,1900

Post-Impressionist (late nineteenth century) artists used innovative mediums and methods to create unique artwork. Artists used a variety of methods to produce unique artwork, such as thickly applied paint to highlight brushstrokes and create rough surfaces, which added their paintings to a three-dimensional appearance. Some painters created divisionism. The artists were able to communicate their feelings and establish a stronger connection with their audience by using expressive brushstrokes and vivid colours to evoke energy and passion.[10]

Figure 10. The Turning Road, L´Estaque by André Derain,1906

Figure 11. Les Demoiselles d' Avignon by Pablo Picasso,1907

[9] Sotheby's EST.1744, What is Impressionism.
[10] Adams Laurie, (1994). A History of Western Art, Post-Impressionism and the Late Nineteenth Century. Americas, New York. McGraw- Hill

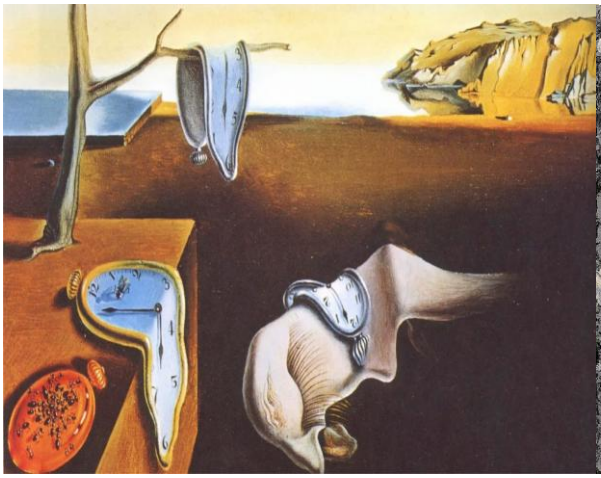

Figure 12. The Persistence of Memory by Salvador Dali,1931

Figure 13.Ocean Greyness by Jackson Pollock,1953

Twentieth century was a time of great artistic change and creativity. Many new art movements appeared, breaking away from traditional styles and exploring new ways to create art. Fauvism is known for using bold, bright colours in an intense and direct way, focusing on expressing strong emotions rather than showing realistic images. Artists often painted simple subjects like still life and landscapes. Cubism, on the other hand, features broken-up objects and multiple viewpoints, making the artwork look geometric and abstract with soft colours. It focuses on flat shapes and planes, challenging traditional perspective and ways of representing the world. Surrealism was known for its strange contrasts, illogical scenes and dream-like images. Artists used techniques like automatic drawing and frottage to create strange and unusual images that went beyond what was possible or logical, challenging viewers to think in new and unexpected ways. Abstract Expressionism focused on large, expressive fields of colour, bold brushstrokes, and drips of paint. It didn't aim to represent real subjects but instead showed the artist's inner emotions through the act of painting, creating dynamic and powerful artwork that connects with the viewer on an emotional level, rather than through realistic images.[11]

Figure 13. Between You and I by Anthony McCall,2006

Western art has seen many different styles and material uses during the twenty-first century. Contemporary artists have explored various mediums including digital art, installation, performance, and video. Many artists use new technologies, recycled materials and found

[11] Mis Magazine, (2023,26th October)5 Famous Art Movements of The 20th Century.

objects in their works of art. For example, some artists have used materials like LED lights, fibre optics and digital projections to create immersive installations. Others have used traditional methods, such as photography, sculpture and painting, in creative ways. Many artists are blending different techniques and mediums to create unique visual languages. Overall, twenty-first century Western art is characterized by its experimentation and willingness to challenge traditional notions of art and creativity.[12]

Western art has a rich history of innovation and experimentation. The evolution of art media has been driven by cultural context and the desire for new forms of expression. Artists have continuously pushed the boundaries of their mediums to create new and exciting works. For example, the artist used oil paint for more delicate shading and richer colours, which made the artwork look smoother and vibrant. Sculptors used materials like bronze and marble to create lifelike figures and dynamic shapes. Artists began to focus on capturing light and colour, creating vivid and expressive works. The twentieth century saw the emergence of new movements, including Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. Today, contemporary artists continue to experiment with new materials and techniques, including digital art, installation, performance, and video. By embracing new materials and techniques, artists continue to push the boundaries of what is possible, creating innovative and thought-provoking works.

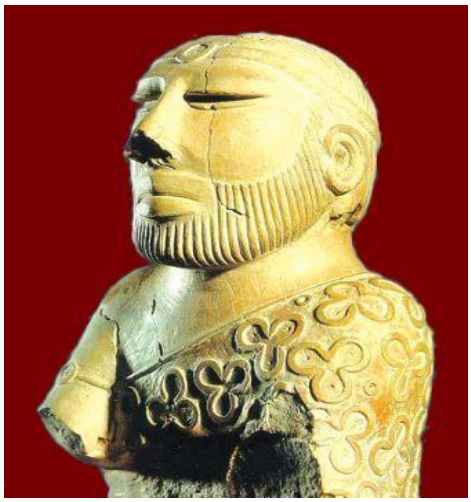

Figure 14. Bust of bearded priest

Exploration of art forms in India is a microcosm of the world's artistic evolution marked by a complicated interaction between local traditions, trends and outside influences. Indian artists showed a deep awareness of material possibilities in everything from the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley (c.3300-1900BCE) where clay, copper, and stone were expertly used in sculpture, pottery and seals. Indian artists showed a deep awareness of material possibilities in everything from the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley where clay, copper, and stone were expertly used in sculpture, pottery and seals. Artists of the Indus Valley Civilisation used many kinds of materials to produce their amazing works of art. Statues and sculptures were mostly made of stone, like seals and red sandstone. Bronze casting was a sophisticated art form, with artists using the advanced ‘lost wax’ technique to create intricate human and

[12] Robertson Jean, Oxford Art Online.

animal figures. Terracotta was widely used for creating figurines, toys and decorative objects. The artists were also masters of metal working, creating intricate sculptures and useful objects made of copper and bronze. In the jewellery-making process, they used valuable and semi-precious materials like as gold, cornelian, amethyst, jasper, crystal, quartz and turquoise. Most of the pottery was manufactured on wheels using clay that came in a variety of colours, including black and red.[13]

Figure 15. Didarganj Yakshi

Artist from the Mauryan eras was known for their extraordinary skill, using a variety of materials to produce elaborate and beautiful works. Sculptures made during the Mauryan period were made of stone, wood and metal. Artists of this era also used a variety of methods to produce their works of art, including modelling, casting and carving.[14]

Figure 16. Bodhisattva Maitreya, schist sculpture from Gandhara

During the Buddhist era, Indian artists used a variety of materials to create intricate and symbolic works of art. The artisans created sculptures of Buddha and other deities using stone such as schist, limestone and sandstone. Terracotta was also widely used for crafting small figurines, while wood was used for creating decorative panels and architectural

[13] NCERT (2012, September) An Introduction to Indian Art part 1
[14] S Geetha, Art of Sculpture during the Maurya and Gupta Age.

elements. Metals like copper and bronze were also used to create intricate sculptures and holy objects like cymbals and bells. It was also common practice to paint bright murals on the walls of Buddhist caves and monasteries using natural paints made from colours like indigo, vermilion and ochre.[15]

Figure 17. Varaha

During the Gupta period, artists primarily used sandstone, bronze and terracotta for their sculptures, bronze being used for highly detailed and intricate pieces, while sandstone was reserved for larger life-sized figures.[16]

Figure 18. Painting of the Buddha, Yashodhara and Rahul, Cave No. 17, Ajanta

[15] Dehejia Vidya (2007, 1st February) Buddhism and Buddhist, The Met.
[16] Next IAS Team (2024, 14th September) Gupta art and Architecture: Features, Sculptures and Paintings.

Figure 19. Dancing Shiva, Cave No.15, Ellora

Artists made beautiful sculptures, paintings and carvings in the caves of Ajanta and Ellora (second century BC to sixteenth century AD) using a variety of materials. At Ajanta, they used natural colours made from plants and minerals, such as brown, yellow ochre, and greenish hues to paint on the cave walls. The paintings were done on a thick mud plaster base with a lime primer to make them last longer. Sculptures at Ajanta were carved from rock and often decorated with detailed paintings. The caves also had large Buddha statues and beautifully crafted pillars. Artists at Ellora showed incredible skill in rock-cut architecture by carving huge rock temples from a single stone. They created sculptures of Buddhist deities like Avalokiteshvara and Tara, as well as Brahmanic deities like Shiva and Vishnu. The sculptures at Ellora were large and had deep carvings to create a sense of depth. Many caves were painted but most of the hues have faded over time. Both places' artwork shows the talent and creativity of ancient Indian artisans.[17]

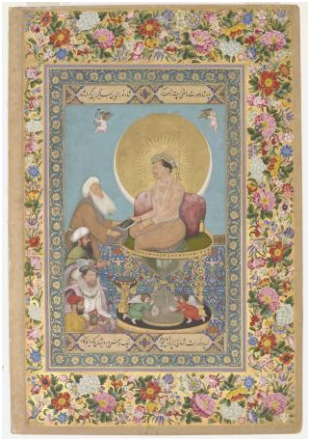

Figure 20. Bichitr, margins by Muhammad Sadiq, 1615–18

Artists of the Mughal Dynasty created a unique way of working with materials for art by blending elements of European, Indian and Persian culture. The emperors, particularly Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jehan played a crucial role in supporting and shaping artistic practices that challenged traditional Islamic artistic restrictions. The Mughal painters mostly created beautiful miniature paintings using delicate brushes and carefully prepared surfaces. Works

[17] NCERT, Ajanta and Ellora.

like as the Symbolic Representation of Emperor Jahangir showed their use of European painting methods, especially in their use of perspective and three-dimensional portrayal. The paintings often featured elaborate details, such as elaborate carpets and symbolic elements like sun and moon halos.[18]

Figure 21. A Syce (Groom) Holding Two Carriage Horses by Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya, ca. 1845

The colonial era in India saw a revolutionary artistic development from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, marked by major changes in both material and style. The style and techniques bought by European painters during the colonial era appear in company painting which show the impact of European creative influence. Company painting was created by Indian artists who were trained by in Western art techniques. This painting was typically executed in watercolour and gouache on paper. This painting also depicted Indian people, rituals and daily life. Company painting known for their naturalistic and detailed depictions of the subject matter. The artist used shade and perspective to create a three-dimensional effect.[19]

Figure 22. New Clouds by Nandalal Bose,1937

The Neo-Bengal School of Art, which emerged in the early 1900s as part of the Indian nationalist movement, was characterised by its rejection of Western academic realism and its

[18]Adams Laurie, (1994). A History of Western Art, Mughal Art and Baroque. Americas, New York. McGraw-Hill

[19] Company Painting in Nineteenth Century India (2022, 24th November) The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Access, The Met.

revival of native creative traditions. The school is known for its delicate and flowing lines, which create a sense of rhythm and movement. Typically, artists used gum Arabic with natural hues like indigo, ochre, and red earth. To produce graceful, flowing lines, artists use delicate, tapered brushes made from goat or squirrel hair. Sometimes, dry brush methods were used to give backgrounds and fabrics texture.[20]

Figure 23. This is not a fountain by Subodh Gupta

Contemporary Indian artists have developed a highly eclectic approach to art materials, seamlessly blending traditional mediums with cutting-edge technologies and conceptual practices. Artists such as Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher and Shilpa Gupta use a variety of materials that push the limits of traditional art forms, including everyday objects, digital media, performance elements and traditional craft methods. Through their innovative use of materials like bindis, utensils, textile pieces, found items and digital technology, they create intricate narratives that speak to sociopolitical realities. Artists frequently use mixed media, installation art, performance, video, and digital platforms. This approach is characterized by cross-pollination across artistic fields including fashion, film, animation, and theatre, allowing artists to experiment beyond traditional painting and sculpture while maintaining a critical engagement with contemporary Indian experiences.[21]

Figure 24. Breathe Closer to The Skin 2 by Jayashree Chakravarty,2023

[20]Artisera Editorial (2017, 27th February) How the Bengal School of Art Changed Colonial India's Art Landscape.
[21] Map Academy, Contemporary Indian Art.

Contemporary art in West Bengal and Kolkata reflects a changing relationship with urban life, political identity and social awareness. Artists in this area often use unusual materials, such as scrap metal, industrial waste, fabric pieces and found objects from the city to move away from traditional art forms and encourage deeper conversations about social and political issues. These materials are carefully chosen not just for their look but for their symbolic meaning, often addressing topics like city growth, displacement, memory and environmental damage. The art styles vary from minimalism and abstraction to conceptual and installation art, with many artists focusing on creating works that are connected to specific places or communities. In Kolkata's lively art scene, old markets, narrow streets or abandoned buildings often become part of the artwork. These artists challenge traditional art by using sound, performance and multimedia. They resist commercial trends and instead focus on experimenting with new ideas, while also critically engaging with the city's history, including its colonial past, postcolonial present and diverse cultural identity. The way they use materials and create art is flexible, responding to both global art movements and local issues.[22]

Thus we can see the journey of Indian art with its rich cultural heritage, combining local traditions, trends and outside influences. From the ancient Indus Valley Civilization to modern times, Indian artists have shown a deep understanding of materials, experimenting with different techniques to create detailed and meaningful works. The art of this land has evolved through various periods, each adding to the country's diverse art scene. Artists have used a mix of traditional and modern techniques to tell complex stories about social and political issues. Contemporary Indian art keeps pushing boundaries by using new materials, technologies and ideas to address local concerns and connect with global art trends. In places like West Bengal and Kolkata, the art scene reflects changing urban life, political identity and social awareness. India’s art evolution represents its cultural strength, creativity and ability to adapt, making it a fascinating part of the global art story. The country's art continues to grow, responding to both local and worldwide influences.

In this context, I am like to study the works of Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar because both artists exemplify the contemporary West Bengali artistic approach that I’m really interested in. They use unconventional materials with symbolic significance, create work that's deeply connected to place and community, and address complex social and political issues while blending traditional techniques with experimental approaches.

Studying these two artists would give my excellent case studies of how contemporary artists in the region are responding to both local concerns and global art movements, making them ideal subjects for my exploration of this artistic landscape.

[22] 1.Mukhopadhyay Rishika (2021,30th August) Hertitagising Urban Craft Economy: Thinking with Chitpur Road, Kolkata, 2. Martijin de Rooij (2020) Where there are no Footprints An Ethnography of Contemporary Art in Kolkata

Chapter 2: Paula Sengupta: The Poetics of Medium and Material Transformation

Figure 25. Paula Sengupta

The artworks of Paula Sengupta (born 1967) are a compelling exploration of the dynamic interaction of artistic media and the transformational potential of materials. Her work exhibits a profound awareness of how material can be filled with significance and used to portray complicated cultural and personal tales. Her work spans printmaking, textiles and installation, in which the idea of medium and concept are inseparable. It creates a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship that drives the creative process is at the foundation of Sengupta's artistic approach. Her fundamental training in printmaking, which is distinguished by its painstaking attention to texture, layering and mark-making, has given her a profound admiration for the inherent qualities of materials. She is able to integrate printmaking techniques into a variety of media because of this basic expertise, which also helps her develop a strong foundation of artistic expression. Her journey through printmaking was influenced by her teacher Anupam Sud. Her early years at Santiniketan played an important role in shaping her ideas. At Kala Bhavan, students were encouraged to explore different types of art together, which helped break the usual limits between art subjects and inspired more creative thinking. Sengupta is able to transcend traditional categories by utilizing this mobility between mediums to create works that are both theoretically complex and visually captivating.

To Sengupta, material is an active contributor to meaning production rather than just a passive component. In 2008, during her visit to Bangladesh, she encountered the famous *Nakshi Kantha*, i.e., the traditional embroidered quilts of Bengal. She uses everyday items and traditional crafts to tell stories. For example, she uses Nakshi Kantha to turn a common household activity into art. In doing this, she brings attention to a form of work usually done by women and questions the usual ideas of what counts as important art. The quilts show stories about home life, tradition and women's roles, using their detailed patterns as a way to communicate.

Figure 26. 8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street

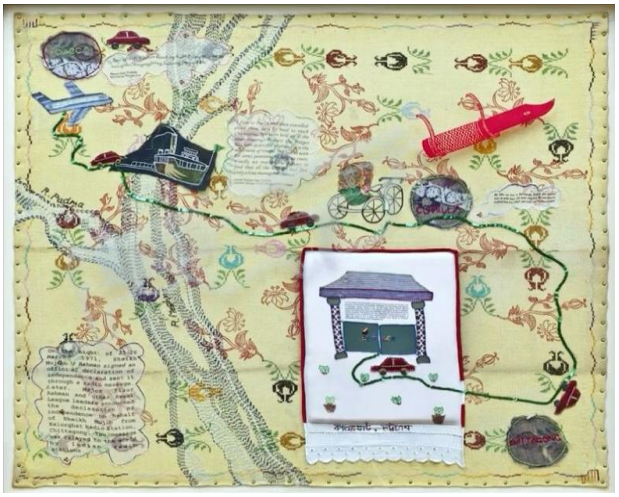

Figure 27. 8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street

In 2004, Sengupta got married and moved into her husband's house that is 111 years old and is located at central Kolkata. It is a large colonial house that has been there for many years. The area around the house is changing fast. Old houses are being pulled down, and new apartment buildings are being built in their place. But this house is still standing and is one of the few old houses left in the area.

Sengupta, however, belongs to a different background, since her family was originally from East Bengal (today's Bangladesh). After the Partition in 1947, they came to India as refugees and had to go through many struggles to settle in a new country. Her parents were the first generation to live in India and hence faced many problems to make a new life from the beginning. Sengupta grew up listening stories about leaving their homeland and living without a permanent home. In 1992, her parents were finally able to build a house in Salt Lake, Kolkata, with which Sengupta could connect to her idea of home. So, when she moved into her husband's house after marriage, it felt like a new experience. Her in-laws were from this part of Bengal and had been living in the same house for generations. In that house, Sengupta began to think more about heritage and inheritance – not only about property or money, but also about family stories, values, and ways of living. She started to look at her in-laws' family as an example to study these ideas. They had a long family history, and many of

them were part of the Swadeshi movement, while some were among the early Bengali businessperson. By living with them, she saw how a family's past is passed down through generations. This helped her understand how history and home are closely connected.

Sengupta's way of creating art begins with listening and collecting. She spends time with ordinary people, talks to them and gathers their life stories. These stories become the heart of her work. When she became part of her husband's family, she heard many stories from the women in the family and found these stories very important and used them in her work. Sengupta picks materials based on what they can express and how they fit the story or idea she wants to show. She experiments with the materials and explores how they change through use.

This experience led Sengupta to start a new project based on her husband's old house. She used found textiles and embroidery as part of the work. While exploring the history of the house, she discovered that it appearing in the maps of eighteenth-century Calcutta (now Kolkata). It used to be a Jewish neighbourhood, later occupied by the British, and then has evolved over time. Around this time, she began working seriously with textiles. Most of her works since then has involved found fabrics. As with many old houses, forgotten objects started appearing from cupboards and trunks. During her search, she found a large collection of old linens, including crochet and lace that belonged to her mother-in-law. Over the years 2007, 2008 and 2009, this idea slowly grew into a project called '*8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street'* (the name connects the past and present of the neighbourhood — *8 Short Bazaar* was the old Jewish name, and *8 Short Street* is what the area is called today).

Eventually, Sengupta began using these materials to make costumes that she embroidered and put together by hand. Her work then started to grow in different directions. She began working with many forms, such as textiles, printmaking, glass etching, and papermaking. Later, she also started using photography, sound, text, and video in her projects.[23]

Figure 28. A Camel's Path

Figure 29. A Camel's Path

[23] Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi (2019,16th march) Paula Sengupta-Interview with Parul: Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi.

Figure 30. A Camel's Path

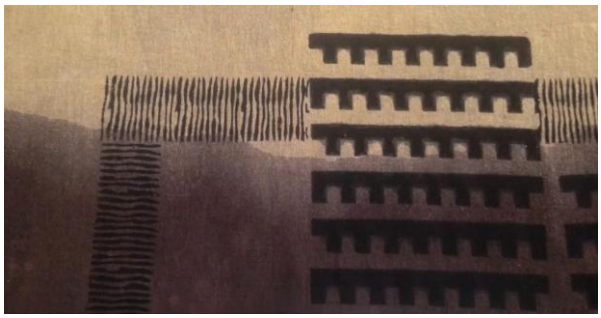

Figure 31. A Camel's Path

Figure 32. A Camel's Path

Figure 33. A Camel's Path

In another project, called '*A Camel's Path*' Sengupta explored the history of the Marwari community, who migrated from Rajasthan to Kolkata over nearly 300 years, setting up businesses and becoming an integral part of the city. She wanted to create work that connected stories from Rajasthan to her own background. Sengupta focused on the migration from the Shekhawati region, which was part of the Rajasthan state, and also from Nagaur. This migration was driven by two main factors -- severe water shortages in Shekhawati and the search for better economic opportunities. The community thus moved across the place to Bengal, which is essentially a water-rich region with rivers, lots of rainfall and fertile soil.

In this artwork, Sengupta depicted several elements of the Shekhawati region: the desert landscape, camels crossing the desert, desert camps, wells used to extract limited groundwater and sparse desert vegetation. The region is known for its painted *havelis* (mansions). Many Marwari families who had moved to Kolkata would return to their native villages to build these havelis and hire artists to paint them. For this project, Sengupta created a symbolic railway line in her artwork, connecting the desert landscape of Rajasthan to the railway station in Kolkata. She also included two birds as storytellers in her composition. The parrot, traditionally viewed as a storyteller in Indian culture, helped convey the narrative of migration. She completes this work in one week and spent her first four days at a textile unit in Bagru. So, she started with her collaborative unit, which is called Ojjas. They basically follow the principles of traditional printing. She used mud-resist printing (a traditional Bagru method) and natural dyes while she was in Bagru. She also experimented with pigment printing using a special collection of wooden blocks inspired by the frescoes of Shekhawati.

These blocks were carefully chosen to bring the Shekhawati aesthetic into the textile narrative.

After finishing the printing work, she added embroidery with some student-assistants from the fashion design institute and some karigarh helping her to finish the work. The final artwork is presented as a cylindrical hanging installation within the exhibition space. This format enhances its artistic impact and allows for a multi-dimensional viewing experience, immersing the viewer in the layered narrative of migration, memory, and landscape.[24]

Through this project, Sengupta connected two distinct geographic regions -- the desert of Rajasthan and the water-rich Bengal -- while also highlighting the human stories of migration, adaptation, and cultural preservation. The artwork showed how communities maintain connection to their homeland even as they build new lives elsewhere. By using traditional textile techniques from Rajasthan to tell this story, Sengupta honoured both the artistic heritage of the region and the journey of the people who carried their culture with them to new places.

Figure 34. Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament

Figure 35. Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament

[24] The Kala Chaupal Trust (2020,4th September) Paula Sengupta's 'A Camel's Path' – A Textile Collaboration for Our body and Hands in Water JKC 2017.

Figure 36. Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament

Figure 37. Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament

Figure 38. Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament

Figure 39. Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament

Paula Sengupta's on-going work '*Into Exile'* tells the story of Tibetan people who are living away from their homeland. She uses cloth, prints, and art installations to show their journey, the pain of losing their home and their strength to keep going. Her goal is to create an experience that helps people understand the lives of those in exile.[25] '*Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament*' was made in collaboration with photographer Sujay Das, recently exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata, on the occasion of Bengal Biennale. The exhibition uses cultural items to keep the memory and history of Tibet alive through art. A central feature of the exhibition includes textile banners resembling traditional prayer flags or thangkas. These pieces hang from wooden rods with decorative finials against blue walls, creating a visual environment reminiscent of Tibetan sacred spaces. The textiles are mounted on Madurkathi mats, which are woven from locally grown Cyperus grass, a material native to Bengal. These mats feature distinctive red borders that frame the narratives depicted in the textiles.

The embroidered scenes on these textiles document significant aspects of Tibetan culture and landscape, featuring mountains, temples, and other cultural elements. Through these images, Sengupta preserves cultural memory while highlighting the experience of displacement.

[25] Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi (2019, 16th march) Paula Sengupta-Interview with Parul: Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi.

Wooden stencil frames form another component of the installation, revealing layered imagery of natural scenes. These frames showcase birds and landscapes, connecting viewers to the environmental context of Tibetan life and the natural world that forms such an important part of Tibetan spiritual practice.

Perhaps the most innovative elements are the eight backlit rotating prayer wheels containing 'The Monkey and the Dog' narrative. These illuminated cylindrical objects reference traditional Tibetan prayer wheels while functioning as contemporary storytelling devices. The rotation of these objects mimics the devotional practice of turning prayer-wheels while presenting narrative content in an accessible format.

Through her work, Sengupta transforms materials including silk, cotton, and embroidery into vehicles for cultural preservation and storytelling. By incorporating techniques and symbols from Tibetan traditions, she creates a bridge between traditional crafts and contemporary art practices.

The use of textiles in '*Into Exile'* serves multiple purposes. Beyond their aesthetic value, the materials function as carriers of cultural memory, connecting displaced communities to their heritage. The intricate embroidery work demonstrates the attention to detail and craftsmanship that characterizes both Tibetan cultural production and Sengupta's artistic practice.

By combining these elements, the exhibition creates a multisensory experience that invites viewers to consider the challenges faced by communities in exile while celebrating their cultural resilience. The installation space transforms into a contemplative environment where viewers can reflect on themes of displacement, identity, and cultural preservation.

This collaboration between Sengupta and Das brings together visual art and photography to document the Tibetan experience comprehensively. Their work preserves cultural memory while creating space for dialogue about the ongoing situation of Tibetan communities living in exile.

As a whole, Sengupta's art showcases how materials and stories work together. She uses traditional crafts like embroidery, printmaking, and textiles to tell important stories about home, identity, and displacement. Her personal experiences -- coming from a family of refugees and moving into her husband's ancestral home -- deeply influence her work. Through projects like '*8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street'*, '*A Camel's Path'* and '*Into Exile'*, Sengupta explores how people connect to their roots even when they move to new places. She works with communities and honours their traditions, showing how art can preserve cultural memories. By combining different techniques and materials, Sengupta creates powerful visual experiences that help viewers understand complex ideas about heritage, migration, and belonging. Her art reminds us that our stories and histories are precious and worth preserving through creative expression.

Chapter 3: Mallika Das Sutar – Material and Concept in Artistic Expression

Figure 40. Mallika Das Sutar

Mallika Das Sutar's (born 1977) interest with a variety of materials evolved gradually through investigation and experimentation. Professor Partha Pratim Deb, her mentor at Rabindra Bharati University, had a big impact on her while she was pursuing her masters. She was deeply moved by his creative methods of reusing and scrapping magazine-paper into a variety of shapes. Her development as an artist was greatly influenced by this casual and unique technique.

Das Sutar began to explore at paper folding as a way to produce sculptural forms inspired by her professor's experimental methods. Her material investigation developed deeper when she and her fellow students experimented with land art using found materials like gamchas (traditional cotton towels) and paper to create installations. She documented the project in photographs and later exhibited the same during her masters' display.

Her exploration of mediums began when she started stepping outside her studio. She has always been deeply involved with the *Chander Haat*,[26] where she works collectively. The collective however was initiated and guided by artist Tarun Dey (born 1954),[27] whose enthusiasm and guidance has always had a significant impact on Das Sutar's work. This space offers opportunities to experiment with various mediums. They work on Durga Puja installations. While she is not directly involved in making them, she observes how different kinds of installations take shape during the festival. This exposure allowed her to explore various concepts through different mediums. Getting involved into her community is an

[26] A collective space in the vicinity of south-west Kolkata that encourages inter-disciplinary activities, to generate a broad platform for community-based art practice.

[27] He is an artist from Kolkata, who has always been actively engaged in nurturing artistic talent and indulging in community-based art practices. As a forerunner of Environmental Art and then Chander Haat, he fosters artistic synergy and collective engagement, pushing the boundaries of art through innovative explorations of mediums and unconventional spaces. His dynamic approach breathes new life and meaning into these spaces, contributing to Kolkata's vibrant cultural landscape.

essential part of her practice. As an artist, she works alongside many other artists, within a larger collective. She is not alone because so many people are helping her, from morning till night, depending on each other in some way or the other. Her conceptual frameworks and material choices are significantly influenced by this community-centred approach.

At one point of time, Das Sutar started working on the topic of violence against women, spending almost five years on it. Her approach to this topic shows how her material selections are carefully linked to societal criticism and conceptual goals. Because of her deep research and involvement with social issues, her work is in order by following a specific project rather than unplanned renderings. She visited many places as part of her research, including some that at first made her uncomfortable or hesitant, such as Sonagachi, Kolkata's largest red-light district, where she conducted interviews with the inhabitants. This fieldwork challenged her internal societal divisions between ‘good homes’ and ‘bad homes,’ confronting the taboos and biases embedded within social consciousness.

While working, she realized that violence is hidden in various places. She had to visit these places herself; otherwise, how could she create work about them? That’s why, before her solo show, she spent two years conducting research. Das Sutar's research also included interviews with a woman who had been accused of being a witch and had been expelled from her village. She wanted to understand how she protested and survived. Another interview was with Srija, who was trafficked to Mumbai at the age of nine. The police later rescued her and placed her in a rehabilitation centre, but her parents refused to take her back. She grew up in an ashram, pursued her education and eventually became a trauma counsellor. She also met a woman, who drives an ambulance and supports her family, and wanted to understand how she manages her work and struggles. After engaging in these conversations, she began creating her artwork, ultimately displaying eight pieces in her exhibition. The works included *'Crown,’ ‘I am an Object,' 'I Can’t Bear It,' 'Resource Room,’ ‘Ruined Civilization', 'A three-channel video', 'Where Is the Equality’, and ‘Wounded Memory’*.

Das Sutar's symbolic approach to material selection is clear in these pieces. Her approach to art is symbolic — she doesn’t depict things directly. She uses human hair as a medium and metaphor, making it one of the most distinctive objects in her work. Her choice of hair emerged from her research on woman accused of witchcraft. She observed that when women are identified as witches, the first thing done to them is the cutting of their hair. Cutting their hair symbolizes destroying their beauty, as hair is often associated with a woman’s beauty. From this perspective, she realized that hair could be her material.

Figure 41. I am an object

Figure 42. I am an object

Figure 43. I am an object

Her work '*I am an Object*,' she placed shredded of her own cut hair within a small wooden frame inside a large plate. She made a frame that had a mirror in it that contained shredded of hair, instead of displaying a normal image. The mirror's reflection displayed violence and the suffering endured by the victims. She wanted to show the way women have been treated as objects throughout history, whether in all major religious texts across the world. An object is something to be used, and treating women like objects suggests as if they are also meant to be used.

Figure 44. Wounded Memory

Figure 45. Wounded Memory

Figure 46. Wounded Memory

Das Sutar's another work name '*Wounded Memory'* uses clay dolls representing another choice of material laden with conceptual weight. Drawing on childhood memories of playing with clay-dolls made by her mother, she repurposed this familiar form to address female infanticide and feticide. She created numerous clay-dolls with incisions in their stomach areas, symbolizing how female bodies are violated even before birth. In these clay dolls, she cut into the stomach area. A cut always leaves a scar — a wound. Every doll had wounds on its stomach, making it seem as if their bodies had been slit open. This was her way of adding

meaning to the work. Alongside these wounded dolls, she placed ophthalmic lenses,[28] symbolizing how society constantly evaluates women — measuring and deciding how they should be perceived. This juxtaposition of materials speaks to power structures that control perception and establish falsehoods as normalized truths. She first considered not firing the clay toys, but in the end, she chose to turn them into terracotta. Her changing perception of the connection between permanence and fragility is reflected in this material choosing itself. She says, traditionally, sculpture was made of materials that were long-lasting and durable, like wood and stone, because sculptures were meant to be in place for a long time, but these ideas have changed throughout time. In reality, everything is vulnerable. All the materials she used were fragile; otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to capture the fragility that exists within society.

Figure 47. Green Marker

Figure 48. Green Marker

Figure 49. Green Marker

Figure 50. Green Marker

Figure 51. Green Marker

Figure 52. Green Marker

[28] Eye-power testing and measuring glasses.

Since 2020, Das Sutar's practice has expanded to include work with children and ecological interventions. This phase exemplifies how her material choices continue to evolve organically in response to social and environmental concerns. She has been working with children — her son and his friends, as well as other children around her. Through this experience, she observed how materials naturally became a part of her work. However, she no longer thinks about her work in terms of whether it is art or not. She doesn't view it through the lens of art practice or its definitions.

While working with these children, she realized that they didn't recognize vegetable seeds. In fact, it's not just children — many people today don't know them. During the workshops, she first asked the children about their choice of vegetables that they liked to eat. Some said they liked pumpkin, some liked potatoes, and others liked eggplant etc. Then she asked them if they could recognize the seeds of these vegetables, but most of them couldn't.

So, their first interaction was with seeds. She showed them ten different types of seeds, and while they could recognize a few, most were unfamiliar to them. She gave each child four small pots and asked them to plant the seeds in them and take them home. She also created a WhatsApp group for them called 'Green Marker.' They planted the seeds in front of her, and she instructed them to water them daily in small amounts. Over time, as the plants sprouted and grew, they were supposed to transfer them into bigger pots.

In the '*Green Marker'* group, the children would send pictures of their plants every morning. Soon, a sense of competition emerged among them — who had the fastest-growing plant, whose plant was not sprouting, who had overwatered theirs. These little conversations started happening among them. Her main objective was for them to interact with nature and build a connection with it.

Figure 53. Regenerative wasteland

Figure 54. Regenerative wasteland

Figure 55. Regenerative wasteland

Figure 56. Regenerative wasteland

Figure 57. Regenerative wasteland

Figure 58. Regenerative wasteland

After that, the project called *'Regenerative wasteland'* expanded when she noticed that in several areas around her, people were dumping garbage and waste on empty lands while keeping their own properties clean. So, she decided to clean five such pieces of land. After clearing them, she scattered different types of seeds there without using any pesticides. She continued this process for two years. The children were with her throughout this process, and they started understanding the importance of not throwing garbage onto open land. They would explain at home that waste should not be dumped in the open but rather given to the waste-collectors who came to collect it.

Over time, vegetables started growing on these five lands, and she along with the children, distributed the produce to around forty neighbouring households, without any charges. Her main objective was to make them realize that instead of dumping waste on empty lands, they should keep them clean and plant vegetable seeds there. They could grow vegetable for themselves and share it with others.

When she went to plant seeds again after two years of doing this, she saw that two or three people had come forward and expressed their desire to farm the land themselves. Now, she continues planting seeds on two of the lands, while the people from the neighbouring houses cultivate the remaining three. Her main goal was to encourage the local residents to become active participants in this process. If they took responsibility for these lands, then waste

would no longer be dumped there, and no one else would be able to use them as garbage dumps either.

The harvested vegetables facilitated community gatherings where women cooked and ate together, creating social bonds that reinforced environmental responsibility. This entire process was about showing how change is possible — that things can be done differently.

Figure 59. Derives From The Metropolis (Sarsuna Theke Jana)

Figure 60. Derives From The Metropolis (Sarsuna Theke Jana)

Figure 61. Derives From The Metropolis (Sarsuna Theke Jana)

Figure 62. Derives From The Metropolis (Sarsuna Theke Jana)

After that, she worked with the women of the temple of goddess Manasa, situated close to Chander Haat. Every evening, the women gather there to sing songs of devotion to Manasa for blessings and well-being. She used to listen to them singing and noticed that behind the melody of their songs, there was a hidden sorrow. She would listen to their songs before she started the Sarsuna project. She asked for their names as she slowly started to speak to them. Some would say 'Bikash's mother, 'while others would say 'Basina's mother'. They only knew and addressed each other by these names. So, she asked them for their real names, but they told her that no one calls them by their own names. Their actual names exist on their Voter ID cards and Aadhaar cards, but in everyday life, no one uses them. Without sadness or bitterness, they had accepted this identity crisis and had never questioned it because they got so used to it that they believed it was normal.

As she continued talking to them, she pointed out that they sang songs from Manasa Mangal, which tells a story where Behula fought against all odds to bring her husband Lakhindar back to life. She told them that by singing those songs, in a way, each of them was like Behula themselves. These women had migrated from Bangladesh and were now working here alongside their husbands. Some worked as housemaids, some made bags, and some crafted cradles from jute. Their entire life revolved around their work and survival. They prioritised providing for their family and ensuring a living. In that sense, the women were very involved and essential to managing of their homes. They didn't care if they had a formal education or not. Above all, their top priority was to care for their partner and kids. She invited them to sculpt clay figures representing characters from their songs— such as Behula, Lakhindar, Chand Sadagar, Sanaka, and Saptadinga. Almost everyone had made small clay dolls in their childhood, but at first, they were hesitant. However, she encouraged them, telling them that they must try. Since they sang these songs and knew the stories of these characters, they should attempt to create them. Eventually, they made beautiful sculptures. No one could say that they had never done this before—despite having no prior experience, they created stunning clay figures.

Later, during an open studio session, she worked with fifteen of them. Initially, she asked them to write their names. Some were able to write, while others struggled — perhaps forgot writing their own names for such a long time. Alongside their real names, they also wrote the names by which they were commonly known. Their own names and their signatures were placed next to the names they were identified by.

Then, in a symbolic way, she created a structure resembling a house. Just as our minds have a space we called ‘home,’ she wanted to explore where their existence as individuals stood within their daily lives. These women were so consumed by household duties that they couldn’t even say their own names confidently.

For this, she makes fifteen transparent house-like structures using butter paper inside the Manasa temple and hung them in a circular arrangement within the temple space. Inside these paper houses, she placed lights. On the butter paper, she attached their photographs along with both their real names and the names by which they were commonly identified. The clay sculptures they had made were placed around the houses on a bed of rice husk, encircling the whole installation. During the execution of this work, they sat around it and sang their songs. Afterward, they started looking for their own houses — some asked, “Where is mine?” while others pointed out, “That one is my house.” Through this project, Das Sutar wanted to see how they would engage with the idea of their personal identity.

Das Sutar summarizes her artistic philosophy: "As an artist, my work is essentially about repair. I try to mend the missing spaces within our society — whether in our food systems, agricultural practices, or cultural traditions. My search is always for these gaps, the aspects that society skips over or ignores."[29]

[29] Das Sutar Mallika (2025, March 16th) Personal Interview

This concept of art as repair guides her material choices and methodological approaches. Materials are selected not primarily for their aesthetic properties but for their conceptual resonance with the social, cultural, or environmental gaps she seeks to address. Her work demonstrates that when conceptual foundation is strong, 'the work itself gains strength'.

In her artistic journey, she hasn't faced any external obstacles, but she has certainly had to confront inner conflicts within herself. She had to question and challenge the way she was taught, the way she learned, and the way she perceived art practice. As she continuously challenged these notions, a new perspective naturally emerged over time.

Her approach is rooted in activism; it is not just conceptual. If she is not actively involved in the work she talks about, then her words become baseless. If she does not take action herself, her artistic expressions hold no real value.[30]

As a whole, Mallika Das Sutar's artistic practice is a testament to her dedication to social and environmental activism through a unique blend of community engagement, material exploration, and conceptual depth. Her art includes sculptures, installations and community projects. Through her projects, she works with children to promote environmental awareness, collaborates with women to explore identity and personal narratives, and uses materials like human hair and clay to symbolize social issues. Das Sutar shows a strong dedication to addressing the intricacies of the human experience and societal issues. Her approach, rooted in activism and hands-on engagement, underscores the importance of action and community involvement in creating meaningful art. By continuously challenging her own perceptions and embracing new perspectives, Das Sutar's artistic journey reflects a dynamic and evolving

practice that not only explores the depths of human experience but also seeks to inspire change and foster connection within her community. Her work serves as a powerful example of the possibility and potent of art to address social and environmental issues and to promote a compassionate and aware society.

[30] Das Sutar Mallika (2025, March 16th) Personal Interview

Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis – Medium Exploration in the works of Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar

Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar are two important contemporary Indian artists who share roots in Bengal's artistic traditions but have developed their own unique approaches. Though born a decade apart, both artists work with various materials and connect their art to Indian culture, but they differ in their specific techniques, themes, and ways of engaging with communities. Their work shows how Indian art continues to evolve as they blend traditional influences with contemporary ideas, making them significant figures in today's art world.

Both artists' approaches to media were significantly shaped by their educational experiences and mentors. Sengupta's foundation in printmaking under Anupam Sud provided her with a meticulous understanding of texture, layering, and mark-making. Similarly, Das Sutar credits her professor Partha Pratim Deb at Rabindra Bharati University with introducing her to experimental approaches to materials.

Both Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar have grown beyond using just one type of art material in their work. Sengupta started with traditional printmaking but now also uses textiles, embroidery, photography, sound, video, and creates installations. In a similar way, Das Sutar began with drawings, folding paper and making sculptures but has expanded to include projects that involve communities and environmental issues, as well as installations that combine different media. Both artists show how creative people can start with basic techniques they learned in school and then develop their own unique approaches that mix many different materials and methods.

An important part of both the artists' works are engaged with communities. Sengupta focuses on 'listening and collecting' stories from everyday people, especially women, and uses these stories as the heart of her artwork. Similarly, Das Sutar works together with various groups like children, temple women, and people in her neighbourhood to create collaborative art projects. Her work with Chander Haat shows how strongly she believes in making art with and for communities. For both artists, connecting with people isn't just something extra they do — it's a core part of how they create their art.

Both use materials that carry important meanings in their art, not just as tools to make something pretty. Sengupta works with traditional embroidery methods like Nakshi Kantha to tell stories about people forced to leave their homes and how cultural memories are preserved. Das Sutar uses human hair in her art to represent violence against women, and she creates clay dolls to show how vulnerable women's bodies can be. For both artists, the materials they choose are powerful symbols that help express deeper ideas about society, culture, and personal experiences. Their carefully selected materials speak just as loudly as the finished artwork itself.

Paula Sengupta primarily works with found materials that carry historical significance, particularly textiles with familial connections. Her project *'8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street'* utilized forgotten linens, crochet, and lace discovered in her husband's ancestral home. These

materials already possessed histories and memories before she incorporated them into her art. Mallika Das Sutar, by contrast, often selects materials specifically for their symbolic resonance with her conceptual framework. Her choice of human hair emerged directly from research on witch-hunting practices, where she observed that cutting a woman's hair was often the first act of violence. Similarly, her use of clay dolls was deliberately chosen to represent female infanticide.

Both artists engage in extensive research before execution. Sengupta's project on Marwari migration *'A Camel's Path'* involved historical research on migration patterns from Rajasthan to Bengal. Similarly, Das Sutar spent two years researching violence against women, conducting interviews with survivors of trafficking and women accused of witchcraft before creating her works.

Sengupta's work primarily explores themes of displacement, migration, heritage, and cultural memory. Her projects like *'Into Exile'* and *'A Camel's Path'* examine how communities maintain connections to their homeland despite geographical displacement. Das Sutar focuses more explicitly on social justice issues, particularly violence against women and environmental degradation. Her works directly address witch-hunting, trafficking, and female infanticide, as well as ecological awareness through community gardening projects.

Sengupta incorporates traditional craft techniques (Nakshi Kantha embroidery, Bagru printing) as vehicles for narrative and cultural preservation, often working within established craft traditions while recontextualizing them. Das Sutar references traditional forms (such as clay dolls) but typically transforms them more radically to serve her conceptual aims. Her approach appears less concerned with preserving craft traditions and more focused on repurposing familiar forms for social critique.

Sengupta's work is deeply influenced by her family history as refugees from East Bengal who migrated to India after Partition. Her marriage into a family with an old ancestral home in Kolkata created a contrast between her own experience of displacement and the continuity represented by her husband's family heritage. This tension between rootlessness and rootedness fundamentally shapes her artistic exploration. Das Sutar's work appears less directly informed by personal or familial displacement and more by her immediate community context at Chander Haat and her observations of social inequities. Her artistic identity seems more deeply connected to her role as an activist and community organizer than to her personal history.

Sengupta's work frequently explores connections between different geographical regions: East Bengal and West Bengal; Rajasthan and Kolkata; Tibet and exile communities. These geographical juxtapositions become conceptual frameworks for exploring migration and cultural preservation. Das Sutar's work appears more locally situated within her immediate community, addressing social issues and environmental concerns within specific neighbourhoods. Her ecological interventions transform local vacant lots into community gardens, creating immediate environmental and social impact.

Sengupta's work, while conceptually complex, often employs familiar forms (textiles, prayer flags, embroidery) that provide accessible entry points for viewers. Her installations create immersive environments that invite contemplation of cultural displacement and memory. Das Sutar's community-based projects directly engage participants as co-creators rather than viewers. Her ecological interventions and collaborative projects with temple women prioritize participant experience over exhibition viewership, fundamentally shifting the relationship between artist, artwork, and audience.

As a whole, Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar represent two distinct approaches to medium exploration in contemporary Indian art. While they share foundational similarities in their evolution beyond traditional boundaries, community engagement methodologies, and use of materials as metaphors, both diverge significantly in their thematic focuses, relationships to craft traditions, and approaches to permanence and process.

Sengupta's work emerges from personal and cultural displacement, using historically significant materials to preserve and transmit cultural memory across geographical and temporal boundaries. Das Sutar's practice increasingly functions as a form of social activism, using symbolically charged materials to address immediate social injustices and environmental concerns within her local community.

Both artists demonstrate how medium choice is never neutral but deeply implicated in conceptual frameworks, cultural contexts, and social engagement. Their work collectively illustrates the power of material exploration to communicate complex narratives about identity, displacement, violence, and community in contemporary Indian society.

Conclusion

This research looked at how art materials have changed over time and how two contemporary Bengal artists, Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar, use materials to create meaningful art. The study aimed to understand how materials have gone from being simple tools to important parts of the artwork's message. The research showed that throughout history, artists have used different materials based on their time, culture, and what they wanted to express. In today's art world, materials aren't just things to make art with — they carry their own meanings and stories. Sengupta uses textiles, printmaking, and found objects to tell stories about people who had to leave their homes and how cultural memories live on. Her works like '8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street' and 'Into Exile' use materials that already have histories to share complex stories about identity and heritage. Das Sutar uses materials like human hair and clay dolls to highlight social problems like violence against women. She also works with communities on environmental projects that bring people together. These findings show that choosing the right materials can make art more powerful, especially when artists want to talk about complicated social or cultural issues. The research also shows how significant it could be for artists to work with communities when creating their art.

In the final analysis, both artists show that materials matter deeply in how art communicates with viewers. When Sengupta uses old fabrics from her husband's family home or traditional embroidery techniques, these choices add layers of meaning to her work. When Das Sutar uses human hair to represent women who were accused of witchcraft, this material choice speaks volumes before we even understand the full artwork.

What emerges from this study is a deeper appreciation for how materials can bridge past and present, personal and political, individual and community. In the hands of these thoughtful artists, everyday materials become powerful tools for storytelling, healing social wounds, preserving cultural memories, and building connections between people. Their work demonstrates that in contemporary art, how something is made and what it's made from can be just as important as what it represents — a powerful reminder that in art, as in life, substance and form are inseparably linked.

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Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework: Evolution of the Medium through History

The idea of 'medium' in contemporary art is no longer a simple instrument of artistic expression. It has become a concept in and of itself. Traditionally the term 'medium' was mainly interpreted as the actual material used by artists like pigments, clay, timber etc. In the contemporary art world, it has evolved into an active and deeply conceptualised element. Modern artists use mediums to innovate and revolutionize much more than just the work itself, because contemporary modes of production are not just a means to convey an idea, but a means of interrogating the limits of an artistic practice. The medium is both a form and content, shaping the story of the work and being shaped by it. This change in orientation is part of a larger trend in art, in which materials cease to be passive carriers of meaning and become active agents in a creative dialogue, adding layers of meaning to works based on their intrinsic physical, cultural, and historical associations.

Because of its ability to close the seeming gap between tradition and modernity, medium has now become more important in contemporary art. Artists are using both new and old media and applying them more as creative pieces that skilfully combine digital innovation with manual techniques. Through the lens of materiality, this intersection makes it easier to examine intricate thematic issues such as identity, memory, socio-political dynamics and ecological imperatives. In this setting, the media turns into a site for experimentation a way to challenge accepted socio-political conversation. It broadens the perceptual acceptance and reception by embodying the fundamental conflict between permanence and transience, the tangible and the ethereal.

The primary aim of this chapter is to outline a sound theoretical foundation for understanding the function of medium in contemporary art, with a focus on its changing importance. It aims to show how the investigation of various media has opened new channels for creative expression, allowing artists to mediate and negotiate between conventional and experimental methods.

Innovation and cultural context are the driving forces behind the on-going evolution of art media experimentation in Western art history. The Renaissance (c. fourteenth-sixteenth century AD) marked a significant change in the way artists worked with their mediums, resulting in a new focus on realism and personal expression. Artists started experimenting with new materials and methods that gave them the ability to portray the world accurately and emotionally. For example, oil paints provided richer colours and more delicate shading, so painters switched from tempera to this new medium. With this switch to oil paints, painters were able to produce brighter surfaces and finer details, which enhanced the appearance of three dimensions in their artwork. They also began experimenting with natural pigments, which produced vivid and durable hues. In Renaissance, artists using charcoal and chalk to sketch and plan their compositions. On the other hand, sculptors chose materials like marble and bronze so that they could create dynamic shapes and lifelike figures. Architects drew inspiration from classical Roman designs, using stone and brick to build grand structures that often-featured beautiful frescoes. Chiaroscuro, the technique of using light and shadow, was employed to create volume and dramatic effects, enhancing the emotional depth of the painted visuals. During the Baroque period (c. seventeenth century), painters used new techniques and materials to show

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During the era of Romanticism (late eighteenth to early nineteenth century), artists used a wide variety of materials and techniques to express emotions and personal experiences. They used bold, expressive brushstrokes to show deep human feelings and the power of nature. Oil paint was their main tool, but they used it in new ways, different from earlier styles. Artists chose bright colours, including warm earth tones, fiery reds, deep blues, and glowing yellows, making the paintings feel alive with meaning. Watercolours also became important during this time, allowing artists to create dreamy, almost magical images that blurred the line between reality and imagination.

Artists of the Realist era (mid-nineteenth century) created highly detailed artwork by using traditional materials and methods. Oil paints were used by them to achieve the high level of realism and detail. They often applied multiple thin layers of paint to build up a sense of depth and texture and typically painted on canvas because it provided a durable and versatile surface for their work. To create a range of textures and effects, these artists employed a variety of brushes. Some of them used coating methods to give their works a feeling of brightness and depth. Chiaroscuro, a painting style that employs strong contrasts between light and dark to give a painting depth and volume, was frequently used. The artists were known for their careful study of the world around them. To capture the essence and a likeness of their subjects, they often spent hours to studying and drawing them.

Impressionism (late nineteenth century) was a big change from the traditional way of painting. It focused on capturing how light and colours looked in the moment. Artists used short, thick brushstrokes and mixed colours before applying them next to each other. Instead of focusing on small details, they aimed to show the general idea of the subject. For Impressionists, showing how light changes throughout the day were very important. They often painted the same scene at different times to see these changes. They used bright colours and applied them with little mixing to make the painting feel lively. Impressionist artists painted everyday life and common things, like city scenes and nature.

Post-Impressionist (late nineteenth century) artists used innovative mediums and methods to create unique artwork. Artists used a variety of methods to produce unique artwork, such as thickly applied paint to highlight brushstrokes and create rough surfaces, which added their paintings to a three-dimensional appearance. Some painters created divisionism. The artists were able to communicate their feelings and establish a stronger connection with their audience by using expressive brushstrokes and vivid colours to evoke energy and passion.

Twentieth century was a time of great artistic change and creativity. Many new art movements appeared, breaking away from traditional styles and exploring new ways to create art. Fauvism is known for using bold, bright colours in an intense and direct way, focusing on expressing strong emotions rather than showing realistic images. Artists often painted simple subjects like still life and landscapes. Cubism, on the other hand, features broken-up objects and multiple viewpoints, making the artwork look geometric and abstract with soft colours. It focuses on flat shapes and planes, challenging traditional perspective and ways of representing the world. Surrealism was known for its strange contrasts, illogical scenes and dream-like images. Artists used techniques like automatic drawing and frottage to create strange and unusual images that went beyond what was possible or logical, challenging viewers to think in new and unexpected ways.

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Statues and sculptures were mostly made of stone, like seals and red sandstone. Bronze casting was a sophisticated art form, with artists using the advanced 'lost wax' technique to create intricate human and animal figures. Terracotta was widely used for creating figurines, toys and decorative objects. The artists were also masters of metal working, creating intricate sculptures and useful objects made of copper and bronze. In the jewellery-making process, they used valuable and semi-precious materials like as gold, cornelian, amethyst, jasper, crystal, quartz and turquoise. Most of the pottery was manufactured on wheels using clay that came in a variety of colours, including black and red.
Artist from the Mauryan eras was known for their extraordinary skill, using a variety of materials to produce elaborate and beautiful works. Sculptures made during the Mauryan period were made of stone, wood and metal. Artists of this era also used a variety of methods to produce their works of art, including modelling, casting and carving.
During the Buddhist era, Indian artists used a variety of materials to create intricate and symbolic works of art. The artisans created sculptures of Buddha and other deities using stone such as schist, limestone and sandstone. Terracotta was also widely used for crafting small figurines, while wood was used for creating decorative panels and architectural elements. Metals like copper and bronze were also used to create intricate sculptures and holy objects like cymbals and bells. It was also common practice to paint bright murals on the walls of Buddhist caves and monasteries using natural paints made from colours like indigo, vermilion and ochre.
During the Gupta period, artists primarily used sandstone, bronze and terracotta for their sculptures, bronze being used for highly detailed and intricate pieces, while sandstone was reserved for larger life-sized figures.

Artists made beautiful sculptures, paintings and carvings in the caves of Ajanta and Ellora (second century BC to sixteenth century AD) using a variety of materials. At Ajanta, they used natural colours made from plants and minerals, such as brown, yellow ochre, and greenish hues to paint on the cave walls. The paintings were done on a thick mud plaster base with a lime primer to make them last longer. Sculptures at Ajanta were carved from rock and often decorated with detailed paintings. The caves also had large Buddha statues and beautifully crafted pillars. Artists at Ellora showed incredible skill in rock-cut architecture by carving huge rock temples from a single stone. They created sculptures of Buddhist deities like Avalokiteshvara and Tara, as well as Brahmanic deities like Shiva and Vishnu. The sculptures at Ellora were large and had deep carvings to create a sense of depth. Many caves were painted but most of the hues have faded over time. Both places' artwork shows the talent and creativity of ancient Indian artisans.

Artists of the Mughal Dynasty created a unique way of working with materials for art by blending elements of European, Indian and Persian culture. The emperors, particularly Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jehan played a crucial role in supporting and shaping artistic practices that challenged traditional Islamic artistic restrictions. The Mughal painters mostly created beautiful miniature paintings using delicate brushes and carefully prepared surfaces. Works like as the Symbolic Representation of Emperor Jahangir showed their use

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The art styles vary from minimalism and abstraction to conceptual and installation art, with many artists focusing on creating works that are connected to specific places or communities. In Kolkata's lively art scene, old markets, narrow streets or abandoned buildings often become part of the artwork. These artists challenge traditional art by using sound, performance and multimedia. They resist commercial trends and instead focus on experimenting with new ideas, while also critically engaging with the city's history, including its colonial past, postcolonial present and diverse cultural identity. The way they use materials and create art is flexible, responding to both global art movements and local issues.

Thus we can see the journey of Indian art with its rich cultural heritage, combining local traditions, trends and outside influences. From the ancient Indus Valley Civilization to modern times, Indian artists have shown a deep understanding of materials, experimenting with different techniques to create detailed and meaningful works. The art of this land has evolved through various periods, each adding to the country's diverse art scene. Artists have used a mix of traditional and modern techniques to tell complex stories about social and political issues. Contemporary Indian art keeps pushing boundaries by using new materials, technologies and ideas to address local concerns and connect with global art trends. In places like West Bengal and Kolkata, the art scene reflects changing urban life, political identity and social awareness. India's art evolution represents its cultural strength, creativity and ability to adapt, making it a fascinating part of the global art story. The country's art continues to grow, responding to both local and worldwide influences.

In this context, I am like to study the works of Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar because both artists exemplify the contemporary West Bengali artistic approach that I'm really interested in. They use unconventional materials with symbolic significance, create work that's deeply connected to place and community, and address complex social and political issues while blending traditional techniques with experimental approaches.

Studying these two artists would give my excellent case studies of how contemporary artists in the region are responding to both local concerns and global art movements, making them ideal subjects for my exploration of this artistic landscape.

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Chapter 2: Paula Sengupta: The Poetics of Medium and Material Transformation

The artworks of Paula Sengupta (born 1967) are a compelling exploration of the dynamic interaction of artistic media and the transformational potential of materials. Her work exhibits a profound awareness of how material can be filled with significance and used to portray complicated cultural and personal tales. Her work spans printmaking, textiles and installation, in which the idea of medium and concept are inseparable. It creates a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship that drives the creative process is at the foundation of Sengupta's artistic approach. Her fundamental training in printmaking, which is distinguished by its painstaking attention to texture, layering and mark-making, has given her a profound admiration for the inherent qualities of materials. She is able to integrate printmaking techniques into a variety of media because of this basic expertise, which also helps her develop a strong foundation of artistic expression. Her journey through printmaking was influenced by her teacher Anupam Sud. Her early years at Santiniketan played an important role in shaping her ideas. At Kala Bhavan, students were encouraged to explore different types of art together, which helped break the usual limits between art subjects and inspired more creative thinking. Sengupta is able to transcend traditional categories by utilizing this mobility between mediums to create works that are both theoretically complex and visually captivating.

To Sengupta, material is an active contributor to meaning production rather than just a passive component. In 2008, during her visit to Bangladesh, she encountered the famous Nakshi Kantha, i.e., the traditional embroidered quilts of Bengal. She uses everyday items and traditional crafts to tell stories. For example, she uses Nakshi Kantha to turn a common household activity into art. In doing this, she brings attention to a form of work usually done by women and questions the usual ideas of what counts as important art. The quilts show stories about home life, tradition and women's roles, using their detailed patterns as a way to communicate.

In 2004, Sengupta got married and moved into her husband's house that is 111 years old and is located at central Kolkata. It is a large colonial house that has been there for many years. The area around the house is changing fast. Old houses are being pulled down, and new apartment buildings are being built in their place. But this house is still standing and is one of the few old houses left in the area.

Sengupta, however, belongs to a different background, since her family was originally from East Bengal (today's Bangladesh). After the Partition in 1947, they came to India as refugees and had to go through many struggles to settle in a new country. Her parents were the first generation to live in India and hence faced many problems to make a new life from the beginning. Sengupta grew up listening stories about leaving their homeland and living without a permanent home. In 1992, her parents were finally able to build a house in Salt Lake, Kolkata, with which Sengupta could connect to her idea of home. So, when she moved into her husband's house after marriage, it felt like a new experience. Her in-laws were from this part of Bengal and had been living in the same house for generations. In that house, Sengupta began to think more about heritage and inheritance – not only about property or money, but also about family stories, values, and ways of living. She started to look at her in-laws' family as an example to study these ideas. They had a long family

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In another project, called 'A Camel's Path' Sengupta explored the history of the Marwari community, who migrated from Rajasthan to Kolkata over nearly 300 years, setting up businesses and becoming an integral part of the city. She wanted to create work that connected stories from Rajasthan to her own background. Sengupta focused on the migration from the Shekhawati region, which was part of the Rajasthan state, and also from Nagaur. This migration was driven by two main factors -- severe water shortages in Shekhawati and the search for better economic opportunities. The community thus moved across the place to Bengal, which is essentially a water-rich region with rivers, lots of rainfall and fertile soil.

In this artwork, Sengupta depicted several elements of the Shekhawati region: the desert landscape, camels crossing the desert, desert camps, wells used to extract limited groundwater and sparse desert vegetation. The region is known for its painted havelis (mansions). Many Marwari families who had moved to Kolkata would return to their native villages to build these havelis and hire artists to paint them. For this project, Sengupta created a symbolic railway line in her artwork, connecting the desert landscape of Rajasthan to the railway station in Kolkata. She also included two birds as storytellers in her composition. The parrot, traditionally viewed as a storyteller in Indian culture, helped convey the narrative of migration. She completes this work in one week and spent her first four days at a textile unit in Bagru. So, she started with her collaborative unit, which is called Ojjas. They basically follow the principles of traditional printing. She used mud-resist printing (a traditional Bagru method) and natural dyes while she was in Bagru. She also experimented with pigment printing using a special collection of wooden blocks inspired by the frescoes of Shekhawati. These blocks were carefully chosen to bring the Shekhawati aesthetic into the textile narrative. After finishing the printing work, she added embroidery with some student-assistants from the fashion design institute and some karigarh helping her to finish the work. The final artwork is presented as a cylindrical hanging installation within the exhibition space. This format enhances its artistic impact and allows for a multi-dimensional viewing experience, immersing the viewer in the layered narrative of migration, memory, and landscape.

Through this project, Sengupta connected two distinct geographic regions -- the desert of Rajasthan and the water-rich Bengal -- while also highlighting the human stories of migration, adaptation, and cultural preservation. The artwork showed how communities maintain connection to their homeland even as they build new lives elsewhere. By using traditional textile techniques from Rajasthan to tell this story, Sengupta honoured both the artistic heritage of the region and the journey of the people who carried their culture with them to new places.

Paula Sengupta's on-going work 'Into Exile' tells the story of Tibetan people who are living away from their homeland. She uses cloth, prints, and art installations to show their journey, the pain of losing their home and their strength to keep going. Her goal is to create an experience that helps people understand the lives of those in exile. 'Into Exile-The Tibetan Predicament' was made in collaboration with photographer Sujay Das, recently exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata, on the occasion of Bengal Biennale. The exhibition uses cultural items to keep the memory and history of Tibet alive through art. A central feature of the exhibition includes textile banners resembling traditional prayer flags or thangkas. These pieces hang from

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Paragraphs	10
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Chapter 3: Mallika Das Sutar – Material and Concept in Artistic Expression

Mallika Das Sutar's (born 1977) interest with a variety of materials evolved gradually through investigation and experimentation. Professor Partha Pratim Deb, her mentor at Rabindra Bharati University, had a big impact on her while she was pursuing her masters. She was deeply moved by his creative methods of reusing and scrapping magazine-paper into a variety of shapes. Her development as an artist was greatly influenced by this casual and unique technique.

Das Sutar began to explore at paper folding as a way to produce sculptural forms inspired by her professor's experimental methods. Her material investigation developed deeper when she and her fellow students experimented with land art using found materials like gamchas (traditional cotton towels) and paper to create installations. She documented the project in photographs and later exhibited the same during her masters' display.

Her exploration of mediums began when she started stepping outside her studio. She has always been deeply involved with the Chander Haat, where she works collectively. The collective however was initiated and guided by artist Tarun Dey (born 1954), whose enthusiasm and guidance has always had a significant impact on Das Sutar's work. This space offers opportunities to experiment with various mediums. They work on Durga Puja installations. While she is not directly involved in making them, she observes how different kinds of installations take shape during the festival. This exposure allowed her to explore various concepts through different mediums. Getting involved into her community is an essential part of her practice. As an artist, she works alongside many other artists, within a larger collective. She is not alone because so many people are helping her, from morning till night, depending on each other in some way or the other. Her conceptual frameworks and material choices are significantly influenced by this community-centred approach.

At one point of time, Das Sutar started working on the topic of violence against women, spending almost five years on it. Her approach to this topic shows how her material selections are carefully linked to societal criticism and conceptual goals. Because of her deep research and involvement with social issues, her work is in order by following a specific project rather than unplanned renderings. She visited many places as part of her research, including some that at first made her uncomfortable or hesitant, such as Sonagachi, Kolkata's largest red-light district, where she conducted interviews with the inhabitants. This fieldwork challenged her internal societal divisions between 'good homes' and 'bad homes,' confronting the taboos and biases embedded within social consciousness.

While working, she realized that violence is hidden in various places. She had to visit these places herself; otherwise, how could she create work about them? That's why, before her solo show, she spent two years conducting research. Das Sutar's research also included interviews with a woman who had been accused of being a witch and had been expelled from her village. She wanted to understand how she protested and survived. Another interview was with Srija, who was trafficked to Mumbai at the age of nine. The police later rescued her and placed her in a rehabilitation centre, but her parents refused to take her back. She grew up in an ashram, pursued her education and eventually became a trauma counsellor. She also met a woman,

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Characters	5996
Sentences	56
Paragraphs	12
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This juxtaposition of materials speaks to power structures that control perception and establish falsehoods as normalized truths. She first considered not firing the clay toys, but in the end, she chose to turn them into terracotta. Her changing perception of the connection between permanence and fragility is reflected in this material choosing itself. She says, traditionally, sculpture was made of materials that were long-lasting and durable, like wood and stone, because sculptures were meant to be in place for a long time, but these ideas have changed throughout time. In reality, everything is vulnerable. All the materials she used were fragile; otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to capture the fragility that exists within society.

Since 2020, Das Sutar's practice has expanded to include work with children and ecological interventions. This phase exemplifies how her material choices continue to evolve organically in response to social and environmental concerns. She has been working with children — her son and his friends, as well as other children around her. Through this experience, she observed how materials naturally became a part of her work. However, she no longer thinks about her work in terms of whether it is art or not. She doesn't view it through the lens of art practice or its definitions.

While working with these children, she realized that they didn't recognize vegetable seeds. In fact, it's not just children — many people today don't know them. During the workshops, she first asked the children about their choice of vegetables that they liked to eat. Some said they liked pumpkin, some liked potatoes, and others liked eggplant etc. Then she asked them if they could recognize the seeds of these vegetables, but most of them couldn't.

So, their first interaction was with seeds. She showed them ten different types of seeds, and while they could recognize a few, most were unfamiliar to them. She gave each child four small pots and asked them to plant the seeds in them and take them home. She also created a WhatsApp group for them called 'Green Marker.' They planted the seeds in front of her, and she instructed them to water them daily in small amounts. Over time, as the plants sprouted and grew, they were supposed to transfer them into bigger pots.

In the 'Green Marker' group, the children would send pictures of their plants every morning. Soon, a sense of competition emerged among them — who had the fastest-growing plant, whose plant was not sprouting, who had overwatered theirs. These little conversations started happening among them. Her main objective was for them to interact with nature and build a connection with it.

After that, the project called 'Regenerative wasteland' expanded when she noticed that in several areas around her, people were dumping garbage and waste on empty lands while keeping their own properties clean. So, she decided to clean five such pieces of land. After clearing them, she scattered different types of seeds there without using any pesticides. She continued this process for two years. The children were with her throughout this process, and they started understanding the importance of not throwing garbage onto open land. They would explain at home that waste should not be dumped in the open but rather given to the waste-collectors who came to collect it.

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Characters	4882
Sentences	46
Paragraphs	10
Read Time	4 minute(s)
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Their entire life revolved around their work and survival. They prioritised providing for their family and ensuring a living. In that sense, the women were very involved and essential to managing of their homes. They didn't care if they had a formal education or not. Above all, their top priority was to care for their partner and kids. She invited them to sculpt clay figures representing characters from their songs— such as Behula, Lakhindar, Chand Sadagar, Sanaka, and Saptadinga. Almost everyone had made small clay dolls in their childhood, but at first, they were hesitant. However, she encouraged them, telling them that they must try. Since they sang these songs and knew the stories of these characters, they should attempt to create them. Eventually, they made beautiful sculptures. No one could say that they had never done this before—despite having no prior experience, they created stunning clay figures.

Later, during an open studio session, she worked with fifteen of them. Initially, she asked them to write their names. Some were able to write, while others struggled — perhaps forgot writing their own names for such a long time. Alongside their real names, they also wrote the names by which they were commonly known. Their own names and their signatures were placed next to the names they were identified by.

Then, in a symbolic way, she created a structure resembling a house. Just as our minds have a space we called 'home,' she wanted to explore where their existence as individuals stood within their daily lives. These women were so consumed by household duties that they couldn't even say their own names confidently. For this, she makes fifteen transparent house-like structures using butter paper, arranged in a circular form around the Manasa temple. Inside these paper houses, she placed lights. On the butter paper, she attached their photographs along with both their real names and the names by which they were commonly identified. The clay sculptures they had made were placed around the houses on a bed of rice husk, encircling the whole installation. During the execution of this work, they sat around it and sang their songs. Afterward, they started looking for their own houses — some asked, "Where is mine?" while others pointed out, "That one is my house." Through this project, Das Sutar wanted to see how they would engage with the idea of their personal identity.

Das Sutar summarizes her artistic philosophy: "As an artist, my work is essentially about repair. I try to mend the missing spaces within our society — whether in our food systems, agricultural practices, or cultural traditions. My search is always for these gaps, the aspects that society skips over or ignores."

This concept of art as repair guides her material choices and methodological approaches. Materials are selected not primarily for their aesthetic properties but for their conceptual resonance with the social, cultural, or environmental gaps she seeks to address. Her work demonstrates that when conceptual foundation is strong, 'the work itself gains strength'.

In her artistic journey, she hasn't faced any external obstacles, but she has certainly had to confront inner conflicts within herself. She had to question and challenge the way she was taught, the way she learned, and the way she perceived art practice. As she continuously challenged these notions, a new perspective naturally emerged over time.

Her approach is rooted in activism; it is not just conceptual. If she is not actively involved in the work she talks

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Characters	7039
Sentences	49
Paragraphs	13
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Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis – Medium Exploration in the works of Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar
Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar are two important contemporary Indian artists who share roots in Bengal's artistic traditions but have developed their own unique approaches. Though born a decade apart, both artists work with various materials and connect their art to Indian culture, but they differ in their specific techniques, themes, and ways of engaging with communities. Their work shows how Indian art continues to evolve as they blend traditional influences with contemporary ideas, making them significant figures in today's art world.
Both artists' approaches to media were significantly shaped by their educational experiences and mentors. Sengupta's foundation in printmaking under Anupam Sud provided her with a meticulous understanding of texture, layering, and mark-making. Similarly, Das Sutar credits her professor Partha Pratim Deb at Rabindra Bharati University with introducing her to experimental approaches to materials.
Both Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar have grown beyond using just one type of art material in their work. Sengupta started with traditional printmaking but now also uses textiles, embroidery, photography, sound, video, and creates installations. In a similar way, Das Sutar began with drawings, folding paper and making sculptures but has expanded to include projects that involve communities and environmental issues, as well as installations that combine different media. Both artists show how creative people can start with basic techniques they learned in school and then develop their own unique approaches that mix many different materials and methods.
An important part of both the artists' works are engaged with communities. Sengupta focuses on 'listening and collecting' stories from everyday people, especially women, and uses these stories as the heart of her artwork. Similarly, Das Sutar works together with various groups like children, temple women, and people in her neighbourhood to create collaborative art projects. Her work with Chander Haat shows how strongly she believes in making art with and for communities. For both artists, connecting with people isn't just something extra they do — it's a core part of how they create their art.
Both use materials that carry important meanings in their art, not just as tools to make something pretty. Sengupta works with traditional embroidery methods like Nakshi Kantha to tell stories about people forced to leave their homes and how cultural memories are preserved. Das Sutar uses human hair in her art to represent violence against women, and she creates clay dolls to show how vulnerable women's bodies can be. For both artists, the materials they choose are powerful symbols that help express deeper ideas about society, culture, and personal experiences. Their carefully selected materials speak just as loudly as the finished artwork itself.
Paula Sengupta primarily works with found materials that carry historical significance, particularly textiles with familial connections. Her project '8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street' utilized forgotten linens, crochet, and lace discovered in her husband's ancestral home. These materials already possessed histories and memories before she incorporated them into her art. Mallika Das Sutar, by contrast, often selects materials specifically for their symbolic resonance with her conceptual framework. Her choice of human hair emerged directly from research on witch-hunting practices, where she observed that cutting a woman's hair was often

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Characters	1164
Sentences	6
Paragraphs	3
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As a whole, Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar represent two distinct approaches to medium exploration in contemporary Indian art. While they share foundational similarities in their evolution beyond traditional boundaries, community engagement methodologies, and use of materials as metaphors, both diverge significantly in their thematic focuses, relationships to craft traditions, and approaches to permanence and process.

Sengupta's work emerges from personal and cultural displacement, using historically significant materials to preserve and transmit cultural memory across geographical and temporal boundaries. Das Sutar's practice increasingly functions as a form of social activism, using symbolically charged materials to address immediate social injustices and environmental concerns within her local community.

Both artists demonstrate how medium choice is never neutral but deeply implicated in conceptual frameworks, cultural contexts, and social engagement. Their work collectively illustrates the power of material exploration to communicate complex narratives about identity, displacement, violence, and community in contemporary Indian society.

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Characters	5351
Sentences	37
Paragraphs	13
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Conclusion

This research looked at how art materials have changed over time and how two contemporary Bengal artists, Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar, use materials to create meaningful art. The study aimed to understand how materials have gone from being simple tools to important parts of the artwork's message. The research showed that throughout history, artists have used different materials based on their time, culture, and what they wanted to express. In today's art world, materials aren't just things to make art with — they carry their own meanings and stories. Sengupta uses textiles, printmaking, and found objects to tell stories about people who had to leave their homes and how cultural memories live on. Her works like '8 Short Bazaar / 8 Short Street' and 'Into Exile' use materials that already have histories to share complex stories about identity and heritage. Das Sutar uses materials like human hair and clay dolls to highlight social problems like violence against women. She also works with communities on environmental projects that bring people together. These findings show that choosing the right materials can make art more powerful, especially when artists want to talk about complicated social or cultural issues. The research also shows how significant it could be for artists to work with communities when creating their art.

In the final analysis, both artists show that materials matter deeply in how art communicates with viewers. When Sengupta uses old fabrics from her husband's family home or traditional embroidery techniques, these choices add layers of meaning to her work. When Das Sutar uses human hair to represent women who were accused of witchcraft, this material choice speaks volumes before we even understand the full artwork. What emerges from this study is a deeper appreciation for how materials can bridge past and present, personal and political, individual and community. In the hands of these thoughtful artists, everyday materials become powerful tools for storytelling, healing social wounds, preserving cultural memories, and building connections between people. Their work demonstrates that in contemporary art, how something is made and what it's made from can be just as important as what it represents — a powerful reminder that in art, as in life, substance and form are inseparably linked.

Introduction

The evolution of artistic mediums throughout art history reflects not just technical innovation but also shifting cultural, social, and philosophical perspectives. In contemporary art practices, the medium has transcended its traditional role as a mere vehicle for artistic expression to become an integral conceptual component of the artwork itself. This transformation has profound implications for how we understand and interpret art in the twenty-first century.

This dissertation explores how contemporary Indian artists, especially from Bengal, are utilizing various artistic mediums as active agents in their creative processes. This study has been focussed on examining the works of two representative artists from similar backgrounds – Paula Sengupta and Mallika Das Sutar – and thus might not showcase the full range of approaches to materials today. Moreover, for various unavoidable reasons, it relied mostly on written information, partly on viewing both the artists' work and talking directly to one of them. However, it demonstrates how materials themselves carry meaning, memory, and cultural significance to the artists and their viewers, challenging the conventional notion of medium as a passive